

The Woodcutter of Gura - A Folktale from Ethiopia

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PRATHAM BOOKS
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Level 3

One sunny morning, the woodcutter of Gura set out to get some firewood. He walked across the plain until he came to the great big olive tree by the river.

He climbed the tree and perched himself at the end of the largest branch. Then he made himself comfortable, swung his axe, and began to cut the branch on which he was sitting.

The village priest, who was passing by, looked up at the woodcutter and stopped to talk to him. “Brother, what are you doing?” he cried. “That’s no way to chop wood!” “What other way is there?” answered the woodcutter. “If you want wood, you must lift your axe and keep going chop-chop-chop!"

“But you’re sitting at the end of the branch and chopping it in the middle! The branch will break, and when it does, you’ll fall down and die,” warned the priest.



The woodcutter thought the priest was joking. In any case, he was stubborn and lazy, and didn’t want to get up and change his position, so the priest shook his head and walked away. And the woodcutter sat exactly where he was, and went chop-chop-chop, once again.



Suddenly, there was a mighty loud c-r-a-c-k, and down crashed the branch, the man and his axe!

As he lay on the ground, dazed and bewildered and aching everywhere, the woodcutter remembered his conversation with the priest.

“The priest said three things – that the branch would break, that I would fall…and be killed. The priest was right. The branch broke just as he said it would, and I fell too.

The priest is indeed a very wise man, so whatever he says must be true. Ah, me! Then I must be dead!”

It did not take the woodcutter long to convince himself that he was really dead. So he just closed his eyes and lay on the ground without moving. After a while, his friends came along and called out to him, but the woodcutter lay perfectly still. They shook him and splashed water on his faced. But the woodcutter neither spoke nor moved as he had made up his mind that he was quite dead.

They tried to make him stand, but the woodcutter thought to himself, “Surely, a dead man can’t stand up!” and promptly fell down again. Now his friends too were convinced that he was dead. So they lifted him up and began to carry him back to the village. “Pick up my axe!” shouted the woodcutter, and they did.

Soon they came to a fork in the path and there they stopped. Should they turn right or left? The friends stood there and began to argue long and loud.





The woodcutter got so irritated that he sat up and pointed out the way. Then he lay down and shut his eyes again. And his friends carried him to the village saying, “Ah, what a clever man! He always knew the answer to everything. What a pity he’s dead!”

Soon they reached the woodcutter’s house, but found no one at home. So they put him on the floor and began to argue about what they should do next.



“Send for my wife, of course!” the woodcutter cut in angrily.

“Right away, brother! Who would have thought that a dead man could come up with such a clever idea!” marveled his friends, and they promptly sent for his wife. Sobbing and wailing, the woodcutter’s wife appeared, and many of the villagers followed her into the house.

“A branch fell on him and killed him,” the friends began to explain.

“No! No! No!” exclaimed the woodcutter, “How many times am I to tell you I was sitting on the branch and it broke?”

“But my husband is talking! How can he be dead! What happened to him?” cried the woodcutter’s wife.

“How…when…what…. Woman, it’s not respectful to ask the dead all those questions,” said the friends.

“I tell you he isn’t dead at all,” said the woodcutter’s wife. “Use your brains!”

The woodcutter was getting irritated now. “The wise priest told me the branch would break, and I would surely fall down and die. The branch broke and I fell. The priest was speaking the truth. So I must be dead.”



“Nonsense! In any case, the priest didn’t see you after you fell, so…” began his wife.

“Nag! Nag! Nag!” said the woodcutter getting up from the ground in disgust. He picked up his axe and went out of the house.

“Where are you going?” asked his wife.

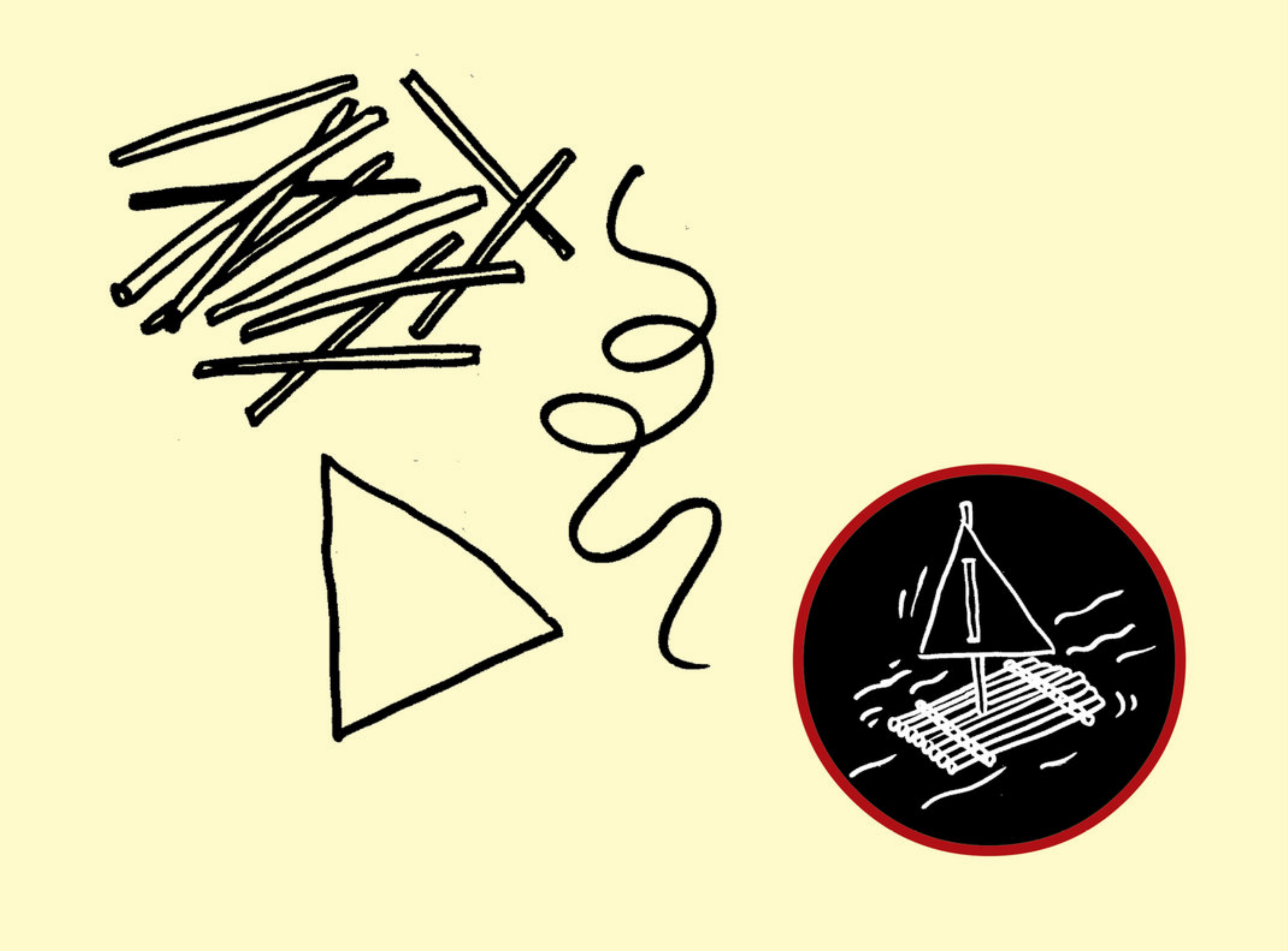
“To get some firewood so that you can cook dinner,” he said, walking away.

“What a fine man!” murmured his friends. “Even when he’s dead he doesn’t forget his duty!”

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And that is why it is often said, “A fool always finds one still more foolish to admire him!”

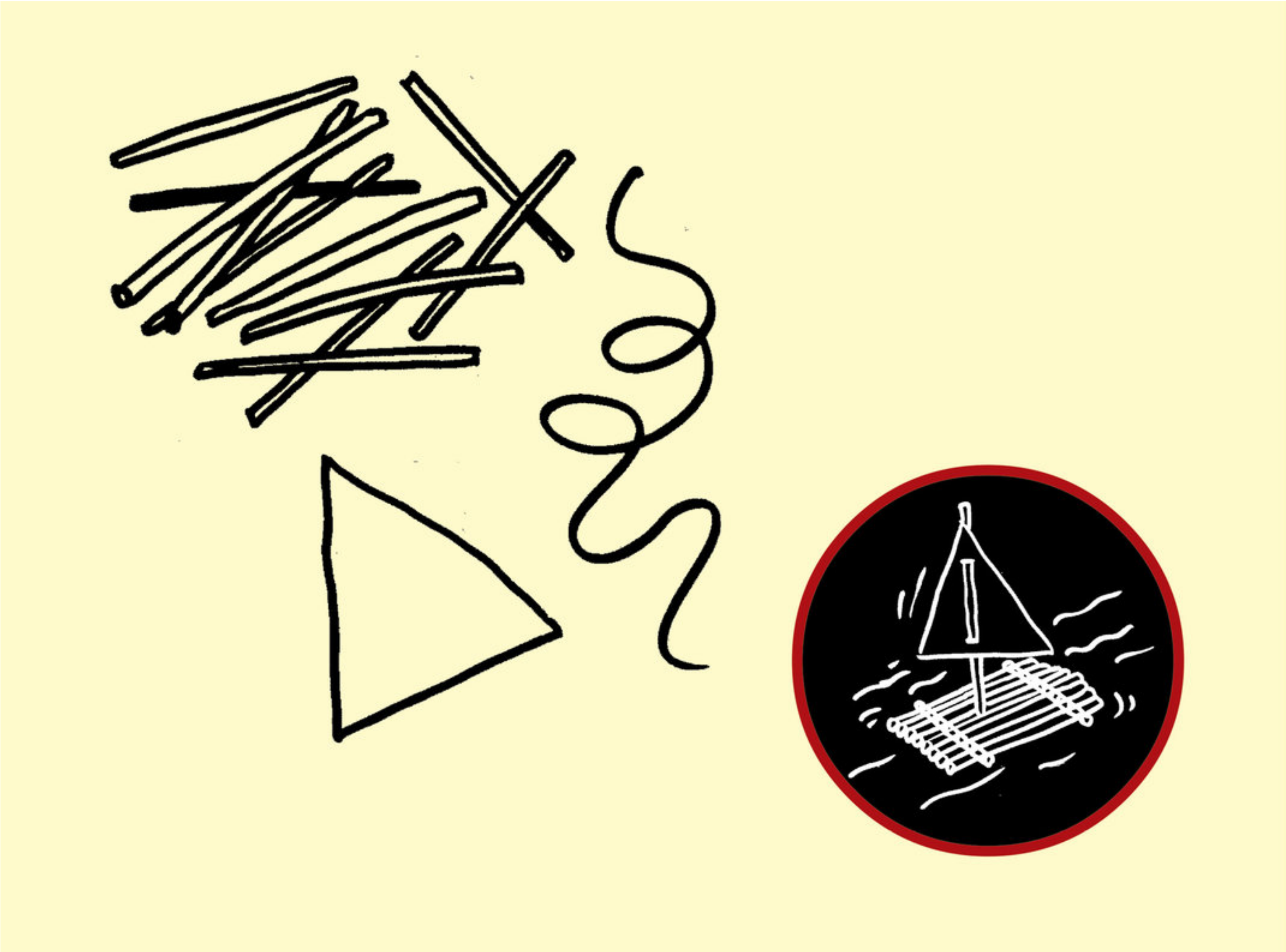




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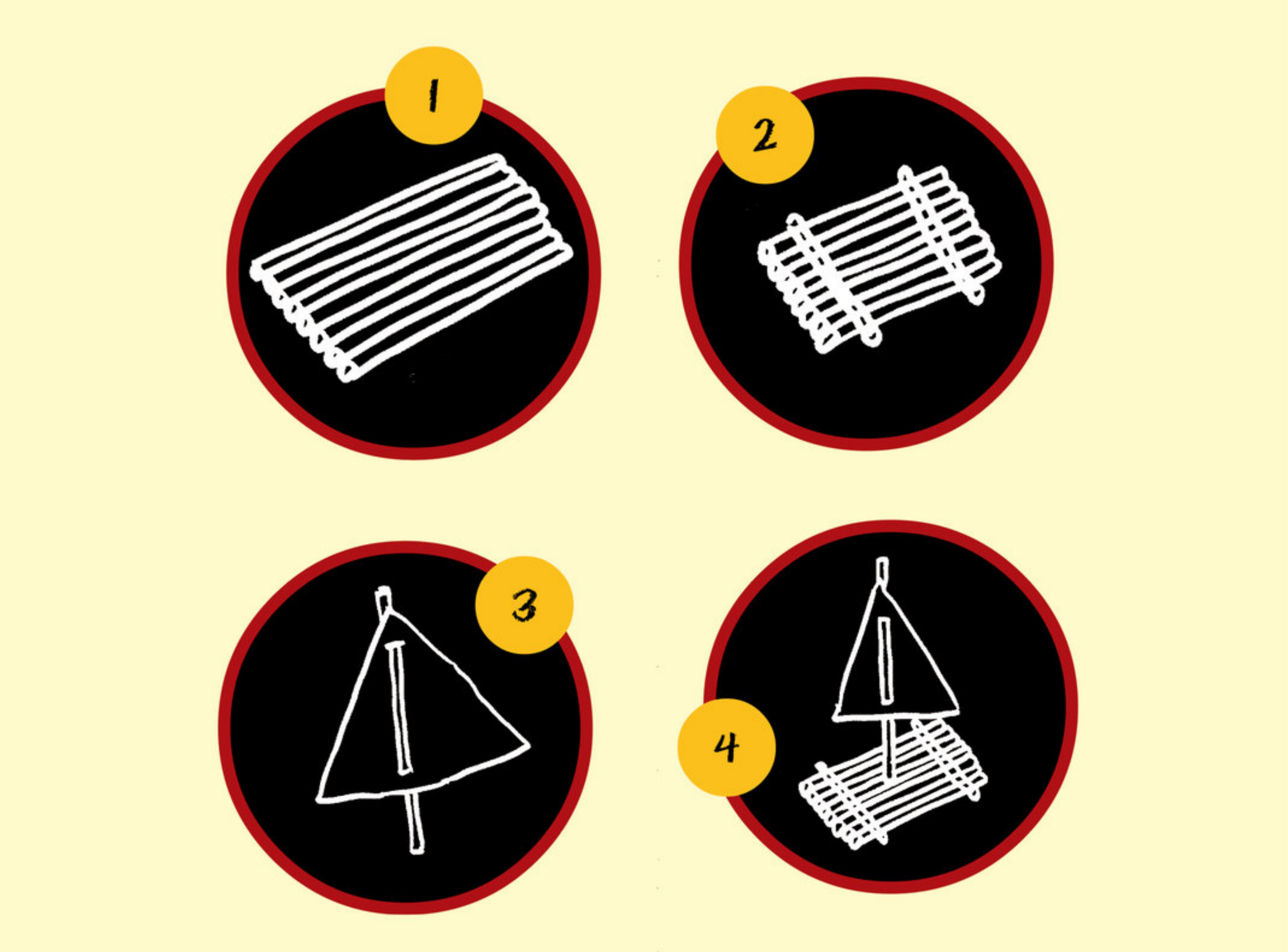
What do you think the woodcutter of Gura was chopping wood for? Perhaps to light a fire and cook his food. What other uses of wood can you think of?

Do you know that people sail across lakes and rivers in rafts made with logs of wood tied together? How about making your own toy raft? It’s easy – grab some sticks or twigs… and get, set, and sail away!



You need:

A. 11 straight twigs or sticks 16 cm long. (They should be about as thick as your little finger)
B. String
C. Thick paper cut into a triangle 8 cm in height for the sail. (You could also cut out a colourful picture from a magazine cover or paint your own picture for the sail.)



TO MAKE THE RAFT

1. Take 8 sticks and place them side by side.
2. Place a stick across each end of the raft as shown. Tie the sticks together with the string to secure your raft.
3. Take another stick (this will be your mast) and poke it through the sail as shown. Be careful not to tear the sail when yo do this.
4. Push the lower end of the sail (the mast, that is) down the middle of the raft, between the 4th and 5th sticks. The mast should stay up straight.

Now find a pool or a puddle or even a bucket of water, and set your raft to s-a-i-l. Enjoy!

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The Woodcutter of Gura - A Folktale from Ethiopia
(English)

The woodcutter of Gura set out to chop-chop-chop wood one day. He climbed up a tree, perched himself on a branch and began cutting. The village priest who was passing by warned him that if he cut the very branch he was sitting on, he would surely fall down and die. Find out what the woodcutter did in this hilarious tale from enchanting Ethiopia.

This is a Level 3 book for children who are ready to read on their own.